No. 4

Museum Notes

INFORMATION SHEETS
from the
NEWFOUNDLAND MUSEUM

Inuit in Labrador: The Old Way of Life

The Labrador Eskimos, or Inuit[1] as they call themselves, are the direct descendants of the Thule Inuit, an Alaskan people who migrated into Canada and Greenland about 1,000 years ago. Archaeologists believe that the Thule people first arrived on the Labrador coast around 1400 A.D., coming southward from Baffin Island.

Upon their arrival in Labrador, the Inuit may have encountered the Dorset Eskimos who had been living on the Labrador coast for over 2000 years. The Dorset people, called Tunnit in the traditional stories of the Inuit, were not related to the newcomers. The two groups had very different tools and house structures although they hunted the same animals. Archaeologists are not sure what happened to the Dorset people in Labrador or elsewhere in the Canadian Arctic. They may have disappeared before the Inuit arrived or the Inuit may have killed them or driven them out. Whatever the case, the Inuit have lived in Labrador for about 600 years.

Map showing the migration of the Thule Inuit out of Alaska and across Canada to Labrador.

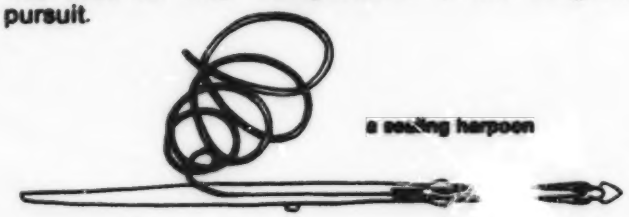
During the early period in Labrador, 1400 to 1700 A.D., the Inuit population expanded as far south as Hamilton Inlet. Although they had no permanent settlements south of Hamilton Inlet, we know that the Inuit sometimes journeyed to the Strait of Belle Isle to trade, hunt and even to raid the camps of European fishermen, including the 16th century Basque whaling stations. At this time the Inuit had some contact with European explorers and whaling ships along the northern coast but this contact did not affect their way of life to the extent that it did in later times.

The Inuit travelled a great deal during the year seeking animals which were their sources of food, clothing, light, warmth and tools. Summer travel was either overland, on foot, or on the water using skin boats. The *kayak* was an enclosed, skin-covered boat which carried only one person. The larger *umiak*, an open skin-covered boat, could carry about 20 people. For winter transportation, a *komatik*, a large sled pulled by a dog team, was used. Dogs were an extremely important part of the economy. The Inuit depended on them not only for transportation, but also for help in the hunt and as an emergency food supply.

1. Inuit means "people" and is pronounced ee-new-eet. It is the term in the modern Inuit language — Inuktitut — that Eskimo in Canada use to describe themselves. Singular is "Inuk".

The sea provided many animals for the Inuit hunter. Seals, walrus, whales, cod, char and salmon were taken at different times of the year. Caribou, the only important land animals, were mainly hunted late in the summer. Birds, lake trout and berries were other sources of food.

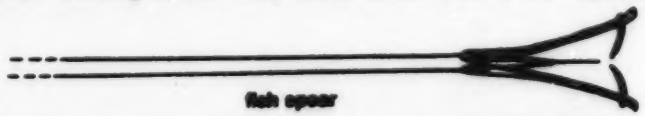
A harpoon was used to hunt the sea mammals — whales, seals and walrus. This weapon consists of a blade of bone, stone, or in later times, iron, a harpoon head and foreshaft of ivory or antler, a long shaft and a sturdy line. Men hunted these animals by *kayak* during open-water weather and on foot in the winter and spring. When hunting larger seals and walrus in open water, an inflated seal bladder float was used to help drag the harpoon line as the animal attempted to escape. Large whaling harpoons were employed in the hunting of whales. Several hunters co-operated in the hunt and the *umiak* was used for their transportation in this dangerous pursuit.



a sealing harpoon

Hunters also worked together on the late summer caribou hunt in the interior. Once the herd was located, several people, usually women and children, drove the animals into a lake or river. The caribou were then slain from *kayaks* using pointed lances or with bow and arrow. A great deal of ingenuity was involved in the caribou hunt. Because of the large numbers of animals killed, it was important that the slaughter be convenient to the desired butchering and catching place. Therefore, the hunters drove the animals as near to the place as possible before killing them. In this way, the "meat" provided its own transportation!

The remains of Inuit fish weirs are often found at narrow channels in rivers and streams. The weirs are constructed of large, heavy stones piled together forming a trap for the fish, which will mill around a barrier rather than turning back. They were taken with a fish spear,



fish spear

constructed of a long shaft with a sharp point and two side prongs which had small barbs attached at right angles. When the spear penetrated the fish, the side prongs, held with sinew, flexed away from the point. Once the fish was firmly on the end of the spear, the side prongs closed together and the barbs helped prevent the fish from slipping off. With the aid of the weir and the fish spear, the Inuit family could take several hundred fish in a single day. These would be dried and cached for human and dog food the coming winter.

In addition to these and other hunting tools, the Inuit had a wide range of domestic utensils, including lamps and rectangular pots made of soapstone, the *ulu* or circular-bladed woman's knife, mattocks for digging and snow beaters for beating loose snow from clothing; these last two were often made from whale bone. One of the most ingenious devices was the bow-drill, used for boring holes in *umiak* and *kayak* frames and in such tools and weapons as harpoon heads, endblades, toggles for dog harnesses and needles.

The Labrador Inuit had three types of dwellings. During the summer, they lived in conical skin tents. Large rocks weighted down the edges of skins. Hundreds of stone tent rings, left by the Inuit after the skin covering was removed, dot the northern landscape. Snow houses were used as temporary dwellings on winter hunting trips. The more substantial semi-permanent winter houses of stone and sod were dug into the ground for added warmth. The entranceway was excavated approximately 20 cm lower again than the living area, forming a "cold trap"[2]. The Labrador Inuit exhibit at the Newfoundland Museum shows a reconstruction of such a dwelling. It is a small, single family house dating from 1400-1700 A.D. The foundation was lined with large rock slabs and a framework was erected to support a skin lining and a sod roof. This framework was usually made of wooden poles if spruce was available; elsewhere whalebones, as shown in the Museum diorama, may have been used as rafters to support the roof. These houses were very snug and warm. Light and heat were obtained by burning seal oil in flat, crescent shaped soapstone lamps. With the addition of a rectangular soapstone pot suspended above it, the lamp was also used for thawing and heating food. The lamp was a woman's prized possession; she took pride in keeping it filled and trimmed during her lifetime, and after death it was placed in her grave, with a hole neatly drilled through it to allow its "spirit" to join her in the afterlife.

Labrador Inuit clothing consisted of a hooded coat, trousers (either knee or ankle length), knee high boots and mittens. Men's and women's styles varied slightly. Sealskin boots were worn all year round. In the summer the skins were dressed [3] but in winter the hair was left on. Winter clothing was usually made of caribou skin and summer clothing made of caribou or seal skin. Two layers of clothing were worn during the winter. The first was turned hair side in to form pockets of air which provided both insulation and protection from dampness caused by perspiration. With the addition of a second layer of clothing fur side out, the Inuit winter dress was proof against the coldest weather. The beautiful designs on Inuit clothing were achieved by insetting strips in contrasting colours from various parts of the animal's body.

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2. "Cold Trap" This helped to keep the cold drafts in the entrance tunnel from drifting into the main room. When it struck the rise, or step, the cold air tended to circulate back out the tunnel. The "cold trap" entranceway was a significant advance in arctic house design and gave the Thule and later Inuit a much greater degree of comfort.than would have been known to the Dorset Eskimo.

3. "Dressed Skins" This refers to the practice of scraping the hair off the hide before tanning. The Inuit used dressed skins mainly for making waterproof boots and mittens, and covers for *kayaks* and *umiaks*.

The clothing on exhibit in the Newfoundland Museum has been reconstructed to the style current around 1750 A.D. Unfortunately, no original clothing exists in any museum collection from this period or from earlier periods. The reconstruction was made possible by researching the written and pictorial records left by the Moravian missionaries and early travellers.

The life of the Inuit in Labrador during these early times reflects a strong relationship between the people and their physical environment. They depended on sea mammals and caribou for all their sustenance and worldly goods and thus required skill and suitable weather conditions on land and sea to hunt these animals successfully. Between 1700 and 1850 there were many changes in Inuit life because of their extensive contact with Europeans. Trading posts and the Moravian missions appeared along the Labrador coast making it possible for the Inuit to acquire wooden boats, firearms and iron implements as well as European foods such as tea, flour and sugar, thus reducing their dependence on their environment.

Since the mid 19th century most of the old way of life has vanished. Firearms have changed the methods of hunting; harpoons were laid aside. Fur-trapping and trading with the Europeans became an important source of income and wage-earning jobs replaced their subsistence economy. Christianity, first brought to the Labrador Inuit by the Moravian missionaries, replaced the old beliefs. The tools, skin clothing and house styles common in the early period disappeared after the mid 1800's in favour of European manufactured goods and a way of life paralleling that of the European settlers. The Newfoundland Museum has created an exhibit that reflects a part of the Inuit lifestyle of the early period between 1400 A.D. and 1700 A.D. before many of these changes occurred.

Brenda Clark
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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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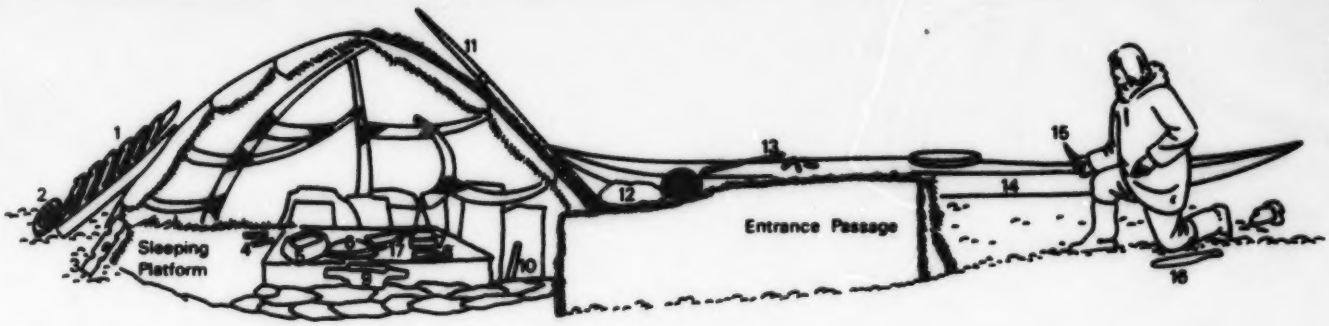

A drawing of the Labrador Inuit diorama at the Newfoundland Museum:

1. ***komatik*** - sled made from driftwood or other wood where available, tied together with skin thongs for flexibility. "Sled shoes" or runners, were of bones or ivory.
2. **dog whip** - handle of walrus tusk; body of sealskin thong, braided.
3. **mattock for digging** - hafted to a handle, this was used for digging.
4. **snow goggles** - wood and skin, also often made of bone. These were to reduce glare and prevent snow blindness while travelling.
5. **soapstone pot** - suspended over the stone lamp, these were for heating food.
6. **seal oil lamp** - wicks of cotton grass were saturated with oil from sea mammal fat. The lamp provided heat and light.
7. **soapstone pot**
8. **hide scraper** - made from a caribou shoulder-bone.
9. **chopping block**
10. **blubber pounder** - for separating the oil for the lamp.
11. **harpoon shaft** - the lower part was of wood, the upper, or foreshaft, was of ivory and was moveable.
12. **seal bladder** - when inflated and plugged, this was attached to the harpoon line and provided both a drag to tire the wounded sea mammal and a marker in case it dove or sank.
13. **harpoon heads** - made of ivory, with a stone or iron point. When the animal was struck, the hunter pulled the line tight, causing the harpoon head to "toggle", or swing sideways inside the animal, which prevented it sliding out.
14. ***kayak* and double-bladed paddle** - the frame was of wood and the cover of sealskin. The *kayak* was light and could easily be carried by one man, besides being very fast in the water.
15. **knife** - with a bone handle and iron blade.
16. **snow beater** - made of sea mammal bone, used for beating the snow off the skin clothing while in the entranceway to the house. If snow was allowed to remain on the clothing and melt, the hunter's only clothing would be too wet to wear outside, preventing him from hunting. Little housekeeping duties could mean life or death to the Inuit.
17. **wooden scoop**

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DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, RECREATION AND YOUTH
GOVERNMENT OF NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR